Nietzsche and the Psychology of Mimesis: From Plato to the *Führer*

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> You will guess that I am essentially anti-theatrical – but Wagner was, conversely, essentially a man of the theatre and an actor, the most enthusiastic mimomanic of all time, also as a musician.
> *The Gay Science* 368

Introduction

It may seem strange to approach the problem of Nietzsche's politics from the perspective of psychology, a discipline that is concerned with the individual rather than the collective, the private sphere rather than the public sphere. And yet, when it comes to a psychology that critiques the affective power of mimesis the focus immediately goes beyond the individual, or the family, in order to include that public arena at the heart of the *polis* which used to be the theatre. Such psychology, in other words, immediately concerns the wider socio-political sphere and, perhaps, *the* question of the political proper. This, at least, is what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe claims as he uncompromisingly states that 'what is essential for the political is played out in the refusal of mimesis'[1].

1 Lacoue-Labarthe 1975 227 (trans. mine). I assume of course full responsibility for the shortcomings of what follows, but I would like to signal that in addition to my visible debt to Lacoue-Labarthe's work, I am also greatly indebted to Henry Staten and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, upon whose teaching and work much of my argument on Nietzsche's mimetic thought is based. If my approach to Nietzsche owes a great deal to Staten's *Nietzsche's Voice*, a book which has been and continues to be for me a constant source of inspiration, my take on mimesis is deeply informed by Borch-Jacobsen's 'mimetic hypothesis' (as he develops it in *The Freudian Subject* and *The Emotional Tie*), and the mimetic/hypnotic tradition he introduced me to. I thus gratefully dedicate what follows to these two *maîtres à penser.*

As we know, this refusal marks with Plato the beginning of philosophy. What is less known, however, is that Nietzsche in his critique of Wagner, re-enacts this foundational Platonic move. And not unlike Plato, he does so from the perspective of psychology – a 'psychology of the actor' (CW 8) as Nietzsche calls it, which is particularly sensitive to mimetic phenomena such as psychic dispossession, enthusiasm, affective contagion and crowd behaviour. Nietzsche, as we shall see, is fully implicated in the affective mimesis he denounces in Wagner and vulnerable to the very same charges, especially with respect to crucial concepts like the Dionysian and the masters' will to power, but for the moment suffice it to say that in his books against Wagner, Nietzsche does not simply reproduce a Platonic gesture. In fact, in his 'psychological' or, as he also calls it, 'psycho-physiological' critique of the Wagnerian theatre, Nietzsche joins the ancient language of *mimesis* with the modern language of *hypnosis*; Plato's (mass-) psychology with late nineteenth century psycho-physiology in order to dissect, unmask and, finally, refuse the mimetic/hypnotic behaviour characteristic not only of Wagner's dramatic language but also of the *Massen* that throng modern theatres and *Großstädte* alike. Finally, and at the risk of anticipating my conclusion, I will argue that far from being a precursor, or a 'Godfather' of Fascism and Nazism, Nietzsche clearly sees massive mimetic phenomena of affective contagion and irrational dispossession coming; and, in a typical untimely move, he turns himself into one of the most insightful critics of mass behaviour. That is, a critic of the masses' psychic subjection to a charismatic figure. Plato calls this figure *mimetes*[2], French crowd psychologists call it *meneur*[3], Nietzsche already calls it *Führer* (CW Preface 6.12).

Could it be, then, that Nietzsche, in his last years of lucidity, attempts to warn the future against mimetic horrors that are yet to come? If that is so, then, it should be clear that in Nietzsche's neo-Platonic *psycho-physiological* refusal of mimesis something essential about the political is indeed being played out. But in order to prove this hypothesis and reach the *political* implications inherent Nietzsche's critique of mimetic language, we need to patiently follow the detour via Nietzsche's *psychology*, a psychology which allows us to rethink the old, yet always actual question of the refusal of mimesis.

2 Plato 1963b 575–884; 397d.
3 Le Bon 2002 69.

1. Nietzsche's mimetic Platonism

In his books contra Wagner Nietzsche makes clear that what is at stake in his attack is not only a *personal* agonistic confrontation with his former hero[4], nor solely an *aesthetic* attack on Wagner's music (though it is both these things), but also, and more importantly, a vehement *psychological* critique of Wagner's language and the modernity it represents. For Nietzsche, in fact, Wagner and modernity are two sides of the same coin: 'Wagner sums up modernity' (CW Preface) says Nietzsche; or, as he also puts it, '[t]hrough Wagner modernity speaks most intimately [*durch Wagner redet die Modernität ihre intimeste Sprache*]' (CW Preface 6.12). These remarks, which appear at the opening of *The Case of Wagner*, already trigger a series of questions that will guide us throughout our inquiry. If it is true that Wagner functions as a medium through which the language of modernity speaks, what, then, is the defining characteristic of this language? How precisely is it communicated? What are Nietzsche's theoretical objections to it? And, finally, is Nietzsche's thought impermeable to it?

In his later period, Nietzsche consistently argues that Wagner's modern language is not so much a musical but a theatrical language instead. Which also means that it is a language of dramatic impersonation, or as Plato would say, mimesis. References to theatricality and mimesis understood as impersonation pervade Nietzsche's critique of Wagner. In *The Case of Wagner* for instance, the latter is repeatedly defined as 'a first-rate actor', 'an incomparable histrio' (CW 8) as well as a 'Protean character [*Proteus-Charakter*]' (CW 5) who makes use of 'theatrical rhetoric, [as] a means of expression, of underscoring gestures' (CW 7). For Nietzsche, in fact, 'only the actor still arouses *great* enthusiasm' (CW 11), and he stresses that Wagner is 'the greatest mime' (CW 8), 'the most enthusiastic mimomanic of all time' (GS 368). Moreover, shifting the emphasis from theatrical to political language, Nietzsche defines this actor as a 'tyrant [*Tyrann*]' (CW 8), and his cult as a *'theatrocracy'* (CW Postscript), a theatrical autocracy, as it were, which is most of all inimical to rational thought: 'Above all, no thought!', exclaims Nietzsche sarcastically, '[n]othing is more compromising than a thought' (CW 6). On this ground, Nietzsche, the prophet of Dionysus, suddenly claims to be 'essentially anti-theatrical' (GS 368).

4 On the personal, mimetic stakes that inform Nietzsche's critique of Wagner, see Girard 1976 1257–1266.

Nietzsche is of course perfectly aware that positing a critique of mimesis in the context of the theater is a fundamentally Platonic move. Not only the rhetoric but also the reasons he objects to Wagner's mimetic language are reminiscent of Plato's critique of theatrical mimesis. The *agon* of this conflict appears to be clearly drawn. Nietzsche *contra* Wagner, the philosopher *contra* the actor or, as he had already said in *Daybreak*, 'the cult of reason' against the 'cult of feeling' (D 197). Implicitly at stake in Nietzsche's critique of the mimetic actor is, indeed, a modern re-enactment of what Plato famously called, the 'ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry' (*Rep.* 10.607b). We shall see that this conflict is not as stable as it initially appears to be and that Nietzsche's early and late Dionysian aesthetics partakes in the "cult of feelings" he denounces in Bayreuth. But for the moment suffice it to say that in his critique Nietzsche is not only perfectly aware of Plato's epochal attack on the mimetic actor, but he is also assuming this awareness in his readers. Hence, in order to fully grasp the political implications of Nietzsche's critique of the language of modernity that speaks through Wagner we must consider the path first indicated by Plato in Book 3 of the *Republic.* That is, we need to consider both the content (what Plato calls *logos*) and the formal qualities (what he calls *lexis*, see *Rep.* 3.392c) of Wagner's modern language, as well as the effects of this language on the actor and the public that listens to him.

At the level of content, or *logos* the late Nietzsche sees in Bayreuth the very crucible of some of the modern ideologies he most strongly condemns. For him, in fact, Wagner's language is 'modern' insofar as it gives expression to nihilistic, nationalistic, and anti-Semitic attitudes. Nietzsche makes this point succinctly as he says that 'since Wagner had moved to Germany, he had condescended step by step to everything I despise – even to anti-Semitism' (NW I Broke 1). In 'The Nazi Myth', Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are thus right to recognize that Wagner's total work of art 'is not only aesthetic: it beckons to the political'[5]. More recently, scholars attentive to the political dimension of Nietzsche's thought, like Golomb and Wistrich, have extended this line of inquiry. In their introduction to *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?* for instance, they usefully remind us that the 'Wagnerian ideology and cult that developed in Bayreuth was [...] a real precursor of *völkisch* and Hitlerian

5 Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy 1990 303. For other works which focus on the political implications of the Platonic question of mimesis, see especially Lacoue-Labarthe 1975 and Lacoue-Labarthe 1987 (esp. chap. 8 'Mimétologie').

ideas'[6]. And along similar lines, Golomb and Wistrich add that Nietzsche's 'devastating critique of Wagner – prophetic in many ways of what was to come – reveals with what penetrating insights he saw through its dangerous illusions'[7]. Now, while agreeing with Golomb and Wistrich that Nietzsche's 'penetrating insights' into the *content* of Wagner's 'ideas' (*logos*) are unmistakable, and that Nietzsche's stakes are ethical as well as political, I would like to add that his critique of Wagner turns out to be even sharper (and more 'prophetic') with respect to the formal qualities whereby this language is communicated (*lexis*). As Nietzsche himself puts it in *Gay Science* '[t]his artist offends me by *the manner* in which he presents his ideas' (GS 187 my emphasis). And it is precisely on the question of *lexis*/manner that Nietzsche's debt to Plato's critique of mimesis proves to be most fundamental.

The fact that Nietzsche, the philosopher-poet, sides with Plato *against* the figure of the enthusiastic artist may initially surprise. After all, Nietzsche is intent on reversing Platonism rather than prolonging Plato's thought. In order to dispel any doubts with respect to his critical stance towards the founder of philosophy, Nietzsche, for instance, bluntly defines himself as a 'complete sceptic about Plato' (TI Ancients 2). This, at least, is what Nietzsche claims in his anti-Platonic moments, and critics have rightly stressed the ontological importance of Nietzsche's anti-Platonism. Yet, it is crucial to understand that Nietzsche's conflict with respect to the father of philosophy is more ambivalent than it initially appears to be. It is thus necessary to qualify Nietzsche's position immediately by saying that his quarrel with Plato concerns primarily ontology rather than ethics and politics; Plato's metaphysical idealism rather than his psychology; mimesis understood as *representation* rather than mimesis understood as psychic *impersonation.* And if much has been written about Nietzsche's reversal of Platonism, Nietzsche's prolongation of Plato's refusal of mimetic language on an ethical and political ground still tends to go unnoticed[8].

6 Golomb/Wistrich 2001 8.

7 Golomb/Wistrich 2001 8.

8 Lacoue-Labarthe is an important exception to this tendency (see Lacoue-Labarthe 1991 168). In this work, Lacoue-Labarthe is more attentive to Nietzsche's repetition of a (Platonic) gesture concerning the *musical* dimension of Wagner. In this section, my emphasis is more directed to Wagner's *dramatic* dimension. I hasten to add that despite the fact that Plato's critique of theatrical mimesis is often dismissed as a simple, tyrannical exclusion of the mimetic poet from the ideal city, his argument against poetry is complex, multi-layered, and escapes easy summa-

It is well-known that Plato's attack on the theatre is concentrated in *Republic*, but it is perhaps *Ion* – a Platonic dialogue where the *concept* of 'mimesis' is not directly mentioned but that is nonetheless, imbued in the *problematic* of mimesis – that can best serve to introduce Plato's critical take on the affective consequences of mimetic speech. In this dialogue, in fact, Plato focuses on the figure of the rhapsode, a public reciter of poetry who perfectly embodies those mimetic subjects Plato wants to expel from the ideal state. Ion is, in fact, a kind of chameleon, an expert in mimetic camouflage, or as Socrates puts it, he is 'just like Proteus', he 'twist[s] and turn[s], this way and that, assuming every shape' (*Ion* 541e). Insofar as Ion's job is to affectively enter into the roles of the characters he is giving voice to, he has a kind of protean personality which leads him to change form at will. More precisely, the mimetic rhapsode does not speak *about* his characters using the third person narrative (*diegesis*). Instead, he speaks in the first person (*mimesis*), impersonating different Homeric characters. Socrates' critique of *Ion*, on this specific point, overlaps with his critique of the actor in *Republic*. In fact, if we use the language of *Republic*, we can say that the mimetic actor 'delivers a speech as if he were somebody else', 'likening [him]self to another in speech or bodily bearing' (*Rep.* 3.393c)[9]. Notice that a first person, *mimetic* narrative mode (as opposed to a third person, *diegetic* one) involves a linguistic indistinction between the 'I' of the subject and the 'I' of the other, a sort of linguistic con-fusion triggered by the fact that the mimetic actor, in tragic or comic spectacles, speaks in prima persona by impersonating his characters' roles. This apparently simple but fundamental point allows us to uncover a literary-affective mechanism that tacitly informs, at the fundamental level, Plato's critique. Namely, that mimetic speech, for Plato, is the necessary condition for a mimetic impersonation to take

ries. It is thus not my ambition here to engage in a thorough discussion of Plato's critique. My goal is, rather, to point out the fundamental *reasons* that inform Plato's notorious expulsion of the mimetic poet in order to take hold of the *psychopolitical* implications inherent in Nietzsche's critique of Wagner's theatrical language.

9 In book 3 of *Republic* (392c-394e), Plato distinguishes between three modes of poetic speech: a speech where the poet 'himself is the speaker' and does not even attempt to suggest to us that anyone but himself is speaking (pure narration); another where 'he delivers a speech as if he were someone else' and 'assimilates thereby his own diction as far as possible to that of the person whom he announces as about to speak [*mimesis*]'; and finally a combination of both styles. Significantly, Plato's critique is not directed to all kinds of poetry but to mimetic poetry in particular.

place. *Linguistic* mimesis, in short, is at the origin of *affective, bodily* mimesis[10].

Plato equally stresses that mimetic rhapsody involves a state of 'enthusiasm' understood in its etymological meaning (from Greek *enthousiazein*, to be possessed by a god). Hence, Socrates can say that through the enthusiastic Ion, it is 'the god himself who speaks' (*Ion* 534d). And he adds, 'a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is besides himself, and reason is no longer in him' (*Ion* 534b). This is, apparently, a flattering statement, but of course, the tone as well as the intention that motivates it are clearly ironic. In fact, Plato implies that the inspired, enthusiastic Ion, quite literally, does not know what he is saying. He is but a 'minister' (*Ion* 534d) as Plato says, who blindly follows the orders of the god. In short, enthusiasm, as Plato understands it, entails a divine yet fundamentally mad, mimetic state, which deprives the rhapsode of control over his art (*technē*) and over himself [11]. This enthusiastic state, in turn, entails a transmission of energy, which spreads contagiously, or as Plato says, magnetically, from the gods to the public via the intermediary of the poet and the rhapsode (see, *Ion* 533d-e).

Now, both states of mimetic indistinction Plato describes in *Ion* (i.e., impersonation and enthusiasm) equally inform Nietzsche's critique of Wagner. His definition of Wagner as both 'Proteus-character' (CW 5) and 'enthusiastic mimomanic' (GS 368) is, indeed, a clear re-enactment of the critical move at work in *Ion*. The underlying goal of this move is equally clear. In the context of his critique of the Wagnerian theatre, Nietzsche draws on the Platonic critique of mimesis in order to discredit Wagner's art and character. At this point, both Plato and Nietzsche agree that theatrical madmen who do not know what they are saying, who lack

10 As Henry Staten aptly puts it in the context of a discussion of Plato's take on mimesis: '[t]o impersonate others is to speak with their voices, and there is thus [...] the element of self-loss or *Rausch* in those passages in which Homer ceases to speak in his own persona and instead speaks as though he were one of his characters' (Staten 1990 152 n8). See also Borch-Jacobsen's discussion of Platonic mimesis in the context of psychoanalysis (Borch-Jacobsen 1992 67–68). Within classical studies, Eric Havelock provides contextual evidence which supports this thesis (see Havelock 1963 20–24). More recently, Stephen Halliwell, in the context of his discussion of Platonic *lexis* and *logos*, provides further interpretative support (see Halliwell 2002 51–53).

11 Notice that Plato's critique of mimesis is far from being unilateral. For Plato's *celebration* of the mad, enthusiastic state of the poet (as well as philosophy's entanglement in such madness), see *Phaedrus* (Plato 1963c 492 245a-c).

control over their art and themselves, should not be taken seriously, not be bothered with. And yet, both Nietzsche and Plato bother with such irrational, mimetic characters precisely because their lack of self-control, and their permeability to mimetic affects is itself contagious and is instrumental in emotionally manipulating those who are exposed to their histrionic language[12]. In other words, the late Nietzsche while disagreeing with Plato's condemnation of mimesis on ontological and aesthetic ground shares with Plato an ethico-political preoccupation with the affective impact of the actor on the spectators as such psychic dispossession appears in the context of Bayreuth. And indeed, it is only if we read *Ion* against the general background of Plato's critique of theatrical mimesis as it appears in *Republic* 3 and 10, that we can take hold of the fact that Nietzsche's ironic condemnation of Wagner's enthusiastic mimomania is motivated by a profound awareness of the dangerous ethico-political implications inherent in the language of mimesis.

It is important to recall that in ancient Greece, poetry was performed orally, in public places, so that the poet is addressing a public. Of course, youngsters who are part of the public are very vulnerable to these kinds of spectacles; they are, indeed, easily impressed. In the literal sense that their character (from Greek, *kharassein*, to engrave, stamp) takes the psychic form of the actors they see on stage (what Lacoue-Labarthe calls 'typography'). Nature, if thus in-formed, turns into 'second nature' (*Rep.* 3.377b). In this context, it is clear why Plato is getting a little bit nervous – as nervous as parents can be with respect to their children's exposure to TV or Internet spectacles, we might say nowadays. But Plato's critique goes beyond childhood insofar as for him adults are also vulnerable to psychic impressions; or, at least, they are vulnerable from the moment that they are part of what Plato calls a 'nondescript mob assembled in the theatre' (*Rep.* 10.604e). This mob, Plato notices, is easily swayed by emotions such as 'laughter', 'anger' and 'pity' (see *Rep.* 10.606b-e). And of course, he equally notices that such emotions, which are the daily bread of rhapsodes and, shall we add, politicians, are fundamentally contagious and irrational affects which deprive the mass of spectators of rational control over themselves. In Plato's language, such affects are mimetic affects which 'appeal to the irrational and idle part of us' (*Rep.* 10.604d) – what we now would call the unconscious – and, thus, as he puts it, are instrumental 'to win favour with the multitude' (*Rep.* 10.605a). Indeed, as Havelock was quick to recognize, there is a 'ring of mob psychology' in Plato's critique of poetry[13].

This overview of Plato's critique of mimesis should suffice to clarify that if Nietzsche boldly proclaims that he is a 'complete skeptic about Plato', this scepticism definitely does not concern Plato's take on mimetic impersonation. We have seen that Wagner occupies the role of a modern *Ion*. Like Ion he is a '*great* enthusiast', a 'Protean character' (CW 5) who strives for 'excitement [*der Affekt*] at any price' (CW Postscript II) through the means of 'the persuasive power of [...] gestures' (CW 8). This striving for affect equally deprives the man on the stage of rational control over himself and, allows him to impress those *Jünglinge* (CW Postscript) and educated people, especially if these are part of a crowd of spectators. In brief, the elements of Plato's critique of mimetic impersonation mentioned above (i.e., enthusiasm, psychic impression, affective contagion etc.) are clearly at work in Nietzsche's psychological critique of 'the most enthusiastic mimomanic of all time' (GS 368). And if it is true that Nietzsche's account of the 'tyrant' does not completely overlap with Plato's[14], he nonetheless relies on Plato's psychology of mimesis in order to account for the precise mechanism whereby Wagner's tyrannical pathos, his 'actor's genius' as Nietzsche also calls it, 'topples every taste,

12 This does not mean that Nietzsche adopts the Platonic *solution* to the problem of mimesis (i.e., celebration of rational self-control over mimetic feelings *tout court*). Nietzsche is, of course, not a rationalist and as we shall see below, not only his conceptions of the Dionysian, but also his account of the master's will to power, are directly implicated in the mimetic pathos he denounces in Wagner. The comparison I am drawing between Nietzsche and Plato refers exclusively to the late Nietzsche's critique of Wagner modern, mimetic language *from an ethico-political perspective.*

13 Havelock 1963 27. Havelock's account, although somewhat dated, is still useful to highlight the importance of the 'Greek oral state of mind', as well as the role of poetry in the moral formation of the citizens as a background to Plato's critique of mimesis. For a more recent account of the ethical role of mimetic poetry in the context of Plato's critique, see Nussbaum 1986 132–133. On Plato's critique of the psychology of mimesis see Halliwell 2002 48–54; 72–81.

14 In his account of the tyrant, Plato does not explicitly invoke the concept of mimesis. His analysis occurs in the context of different forms of governments (timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny), and how they dialectically emerge from each other (see *Rep.* 8.544–9.580c). Yet, Plato's critique of the tyrant is predicated on a critique of this figure's vulnerability to irrational emotions that is strikingly reminiscent of his critique of the mimetic poet. In fact, he compares the tyrant to 'the drunken, the erotic, the maniacal' (*Rep.* 9.573c), and adds, in a critical mood reminiscent of his account of Ion (rather than in the worried mood that informs the critique of the poet in the *Republic*) that the tyrant, 'while unable to control himself attempts to rule over others' (*Rep.* 9.579c).

every resistance' (CW 8). Wagner's tyranny, in short, cannot be dissociated from the power of mimetic pathos.

But if Wagner's language falls so neatly within the framework of the Platonic critical frame , why, we may now ask, should Nietzsche persist in saying that through Wagner *modernity* speaks its most intimate language? Should he not rather say that this mimetic language is most characteristic of Ancient Greece? More problematically, isn't the theatrical language of enthusiasm, dramatic impersonation and contagious intoxication characteristic of Nietzsche's conception of Greek tragedy as it appears in his first book devoted to Wagner under the name of the Dionysian?

2. The Dionysian patho(-)logy

A schematic look at section 8 of *The Birth of Tragedy* is sufficient to indicate that the mimetic characteristics the *late* Nietzsche vehemently denounces in his rival, equally inform his *early* enthusiastic conception of the Dionysian. As it was also the case in Nietzsche's late critique of Wagner, the question of affective mimesis underscores the process of artistic creation, the actor's impersonation and the public contagion that ensues. First, Nietzsche tells us, the 'dramatist' 'feel[s] the urge to transform himself and to speak out of other bodies and souls' (BT 8); second, the chorus's dramatization involves 'act[ing] as if one had actually entered into another body, another character' (BT 8); and third, Nietzsche writes that '[t]he Dionysian excitement is capable of communicating this artistic gift to a multitude [*Masse*]' and that 'this phenomenon is encountered epidemically' (BT 8). In brief, this mimetic con-fusion between self and other which spreads contagiously, as '"Volkskrankheiten"' do (BT 1), and affects entire populations is as much a Dionysian as it is a Wagnerian phenomenon[15].

This analogy should not come as a surprise. After all, Wagner (along with Schopenhauer), was admittedly one of the main sources of inspiration for Nietzsche's early conception of the Dionysian[16]. But for our purpose it is important to realize that Nietzsche's sources do not stop with major exponents of German Romanticism. In fact, even though in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche is especially severe with respect to Socrates (alias 'the theoretical man'), Plato's account of mimetic inspiration is not too far from his mind[17]. Here is a passage from *Ion* that strikes readers of Nietzsche with a sense of *déjà vu:*

> as the worshiping Corybantes are not in their senses when they dance, so the lyric poets are not in their sense when they make these lovely lyric poems. No when once they launch into harmony and rhythm, they are seized with the Bacchic transport, and are possessed – as the bacchants, when possessed, draw milk and honey from the rivers, but not when in their senses. (*Ion* 533e-534a)

Clearly, Plato's evaluation of artistic creation is radically opposed to Nietzsche's take on the Dionysian. At least in *Ion* (but not in *Phaedrus,* see 244–245c) Plato condemns the Dionysian madness the early Nietzsche enthusiastically celebrates. And yet, we equally see from Plato's influential account poetic inspiration (which is part of a larger discussion of dramatic rhapsody) that Nietzsche is not the first to link the process of artistic creation to the Dionysian 'possession' and the 'swirling crowd of Bacchic enthusiasts' (BT 8) it entails. This connection is, indeed, as old as Plato, and Nietzsche, the young professor of philology was, of course, particularly well-placed to draw on the mimetic content of this fundamentally Platonic analogy in order to develop his artistic metaphysics.

Now, after this bewildering detour via the psychology of the actor, which has taken us from the late back to the early Nietzsche, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know where exactly Nietzsche is standing with respect to the problematic of affective mimesis. In order to make sense of Nietzsche's contradictory evaluations of the mimetic actor it is crucial to understand that the models Nietzsche most vehemently opposes provide him with the conceptual tools to operate such an opposition. Nietzsche's position, in other words, is truly 'agonal', in the specific

15 This is not the place to enter into a detailed reading of the artistic and metaphysical implications of *The Birth of Tragedy* but simply to recognize a basic, but fundamental psychological continuity between Nietzsche's early celebration of the Dionysian and his late critique of Wagner. On Dionysian mimesis in BT, see Drost 1986 309–317. For a concise and, for my argument, decisive articulation of the Wagnerian hysteria, Dionysian impersonation and Plato's mimesis, see Staten 1990 151–152.

16 On the Romantic influences on Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysian, see Thorgeirsdottir 1996 32–36.

17 As Staten puts it, '[i]mpersonation, the properly Dionysian mimesis, is already identified by Plato in book 3 of the *Republic*, in a discussion that has tremendous resonance with *The Birth of Tragedy*, as mimetic contamination itself" (Staten 1990 152 n8).

sense Herman Siemens gives to this term in his analysis of *Betrachtung* in the early Nietzsche: i.e., it entails a 'strategy of empowerment *through and against* an overwhelming opponent, an emancipatory dynamic of *overcoming* and *acknowledgement*'[18]. Which also means that for Nietzsche, thinking *contra* a model involves, at the same time, thinking *with* him, insofar as the opponent's argument is already internal to the subject, and informs his critical approach.

The mimetic movement of Nietzsche's thought becomes increasingly difficult to follow at those moments where Nietzsche is confronting more than one opponent at once. It is clear that in *The Case of Wagner* the late Nietzsche is dealing with the same *psychological* phenomenon as the early Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy,* but this time his evaluation radically diverges. The Dionysian mimesis he had celebrated in his youth through Wagner against Plato[19], is later condemned *with* Plato, *contra* Wagner. As he moves from his early to his late account of artistic creation, Nietzsche swings from one mimetic model/rival from another, from Wagner to Plato; from an *aesthetic* celebration of mimesis to its *ethico-political* condemnation. More specifically, the Dionysian mimesis at work in Wagner's theatre which Nietzsche once celebrated for bringing the tragic world of Ancient Greece (and the aesthetics it entails) back to life is now vehemently opposed for conjuring up another fundamentally Greek phenomenon (and the moral problematic that condemns it): namely, the problem of mimesis which, as we have seen, haunts Plato's *Republic.* But if Nietzsche's *early* conception of the Dionysian is, for obvious reasons, inextricably intertwined with Wagner's enthusiastic mimomania, shouldn't the *late* Nietzsche, who denounces Wagner, turn his back to the Dionysian as well?

Indeed, in his 'Attempt at Self-Criticism' – which appeared in the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1886 – Nietzsche will be severely

18 Siemens 2001 82. Siemens situates this strategy in a broader cultural context, specifying that 'the Greek agon is the *source* of Nietzsche's peculiar antagonistic sense of *Betrachten*' (Siemens 2001 83). For the Greeks, as Siemens puts it, such agonal configuration as it appeared in poetic contests involved both 'contestation' and 'assimilation': 'to learn from the other is to turn the other into an antagonist who provokes a contending claim or creation that draws on the other in order to surpass it. In this process the other is not impoverished, but acknowledged and "honoured"' (Siemens 2001 106). This structural movement of contestation via assimilation, as recognized by Siemens, still informs Nietzsche's later work.

19 I am simplifying. I should rather say through Wagner *and* Plato's account of the Dionysian, against Socrates, the theoretical man.

critical of the kind of music which, to his youthful ears, allowed for the rebirth of the Dionysian: he calls it now 'a first rate destroyer of nerves' (BT Attempt 6). However, neither in this essay, nor in his subsequent writings will he go as far as distancing himself from his early conception of Dionysian pathos. It is true that in 'Attempt' Nietzsche is much more careful about his celebration of Dionysian mimesis, and is ready to admit that the question 'what is Dionysian?' is a 'difficult psychological question' (BT Attempt 4). He even considers the possibility of relegating the 'Dionysian madness' as well as the culture that produces it, to the sphere of pathology. Thus, he writes: 'Is [Dionysian – NL] madness perhaps not necessarily a symptom of degeneration, decline, and the final stage of culture?' (BT Attempt 4). And yet, while considering this possibility, he does not take hold of it. Instead, he attempts to draw this symptom to the side of health. Thus, having the Dionysian in mind, he asks: 'Are there perhaps – a question for psychiatrists – such things as neuroses of health? [*Neurosen der Gesundheit?*]' (BT Attempt 4 1.16).

Nietzsche will keep returning to the Dionysian mimesis until the very end, considering it as a sign of health while, paradoxically, defining it through the language of psychic sickness. In *Twilight of the Idols,* for instance, he returns to the aesthetic distinction that had occupied him in his youth by contrasting Apollonian *Rausch* to Dionysian *Rausch*, that is, an excitation of the visual sense (*das Auge erregt*), to an excitation of the whole affective system (*das gesammte Affekt-System erregt*). 'In the Dionysian state', he writes,

> the whole affective system is excited and enhanced: so that it discharges all its means of expression at once and drives forth simultaneously the power of representation, imitation, [*Nachbildens*] transfiguration, transformation, and every kind of mimicking and acting [*alle Art Mimik und Schauspielerei*]. The essential feature here remains the ease of metamorphosis, the inability not to react (similar to certain hysterical types who also, upon any suggestion, enter in any role). It is impossible for the Dionysian type not to understand any suggestion [*Suggestion*], he does not overlook any sign of an affect [...] He enters into any skin, into any affect: he constantly transforms himself. (TI Expeditions 10 6.117–118)

Mimicry, *Schauspielerei*, but also susceptibility to suggestion, and hysteria! The Dionysian artist, when he creates, is indeed, up to the neck in mimetic sickness. But despite Nietzsche's use of the language of pathology, he never goes as far as repudiating this state of hyper-affective excitation. On the contrary, affective mimicry, histrionics and hysteric susceptibility to suggestion are, according to the late Nietzsche, the necessary

emotional conditions for a truly healthy creative expression to take place[20]. Nietzsche, in other words, turns a mimetic pathology into a sign of creative strength, at least, so long as his focus is in on his own aesthetic speculations[21].

This is one of the moments where the agonal motor of Nietzsche's thought remains suspended between contradictory propositions. Two competing evaluations of mimetic subjectivity simultaneously transect his late writings. One of them consistently appears as Nietzsche attacks Wagner histrionics in terms of 'sickness' (CW Preface). The other enthusiastically celebrates mimetic suggestibility and hysteria for its creative potential, and he does so under the rubric 'the great Dionysian question mark' (BT Attempt 6). Hence, the critical distance he posits with respect to the mimeticism at work in the Wagnerian pathos is openly undermined by the Dionysian neurosis he is not ready to let go of. Both his critical, rational discourse on mimetic pathos (i.e., patho-logy) and his own affective implication in it (pathology) are simultaneously at work, each aspect of his thought indifferent to the other. And if it is true that Nietzsche begins *The Case of Wagner* by acknowledging his contamination by the Wagnerian sickness ('Wagner is merely one of my sicknesses', CW Preface); it is equally true that he claims to have completely recovered ('My greatest experience was a recovery', ibid.)[22]. Be that as it may, in the pages that follow such claims of infection and recovery, he suspiciously refrains from explicitly invoking his Dionysian neurosis in connection to his account of Wagnerian sickness, treating the former

20 Nietzsche's emphasis on the psycho-physiology of the mimetic actor is also at work in the *Nachlass*, see for instance, WP 809–813 (cf. 14[119] 13; 10[60] 12; 14[170] 13; 16[89] 13).

21 Thorgeirsdottir maintains a conceptual distinction between what she calls 'decadent physiology and Dionysian art' (1996 235). In order to do so she follows Nietzsche's *conceptual* opposition between active and reactive; art that stems from an 'overflowing of force' and art that stems for a 'feeling of lack' (Thorgeirsdottir 1996 214). And yet, from the *affective* point of view, she acknowledges that these two physiologies are extremely difficult to keep apart. Thus she writes: 'especially the descriptions of Dionysian frenzy [*Rausch*] and Dionysian histrionics [*Schauspielerei*] show parallels to the concepts of decadent frenzy and decadent histrionics' (Thorgeirsdottir 1996 204–205). And again: 'The central meaning that decadent histrionics and hysteria occupy in the critique of late Romantic art is a proof for the proximity of Dionysian art to aspects of decadent art' (Thorgeirsdottir 1996 234; trans. mine).

22 This affirmation runs against his persistency in linking the Dionysian with the kind of mimetic pathology he denounces in Wagner.

as completely external to the latter. Such textual moments seem to indicate an unresolved ambivalence in Nietzsche's critique of the mimetic subject, an ambivalence whose complex (mimetic) logic I cannot fully address here[23]. For our purpose suffice it to say that the late Nietzsche is not ready to fully take hold of his own diagnosis so as to consider the mimetic hysteria which operates within his late conception of the Dionysian as a sickness which needs to be overcome.

Yet, it is equally crucial to see that this partiality does not prevent Nietzsche from setting his psycho-physiological insights into his Dionysian hysteria and suggestibility to work in order to push his critique of Wagner and modernity further, towards new theoretical territory. In fact, in this shift of attention from antiquity to modernity, from the Dionysian back to Wagner, Nietzsche turns his implication in mimetic pathology into a truly critical patho-logy: i.e., a rational discourse on mimetic pathos which diagnoses the hysteric, neurotic and suggestible status of the actor and the modern crowd that is hypnotized by him.

3. Psycho-physiology of the *âme moderne*

The late Nietzsche's considerations on the Wagnerian theatre open up the problematic of crowd psychology that was already beginning to haunt Plato's *Republic*, but Nietzsche gives a modern psycho-physiological twist to the Platonic critique. In fact, he draws on the modern language of 'neurosis', 'hysteria' and 'suggestion', – that is to say, the language of late nineteenth century French psycho-physiology we have seen at work in his account of the Dionysian – in order to diagnose the language Wagner uses to convince the modern masses. With this shift in the meta-language Nietzsche uses to diagnose the Wagnerian, mimetic language in mind, we can thus better understand why he says that his 'objections to the music of Wagner are physiological objections' (NW Objections). More precisely, underlying Nietzsche's psycho-physiological critique of Wagner's *Erfolg* (and the means to reach such success) is a heuristic

23 In a project currently underway, provisionally entitled *The Phantom of the Ego*, I consider at length the philosophical as well as affective reasons that are responsible for the paradoxical movement of Nietzsche's mimetic thought by focusing on Nietzsche's affective implication in the mimetic affects – such as artistic intoxication, but also compassion and identification – he so deftly critiques. For an insightful analysis of the affective movement of Nietzsche's thought which confronts the question of Dionysian-Wagnerian hysteria, see Staten 1990 145–152.

model which, in the last years of Nietzsche's life, was gaining increasing popularity and scientific respectability: i.e., the model of hypnotic suggestion.

Despite the fact that Nietzsche's familiarity with modern theories of hypnosis is, indeed, clearly visible in his later work, scholars have tended to neglect this aspect of Nietzsche's thought. Psychologically speaking, Nietzsche is still too often considered as an original precursor of psychoanalysis rather than an inventive inheritor of a pre-Freudian psychological tradition[24]. And yet, recently, important exceptions to this trend have begun to show that the late Nietzsche was not an isolated thinker cut off from contemporary theoretical developments, but rather was very much aware of the late nineteenth century psychological theories, theories dominated by the paradigm of hypnosis. Martin Stingelin, for instance, makes clear that it is in Ribot's *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* that Nietzsche finds access to the most recent developments in French psycho-physiology:

> Here Nietzsche could have read articles or reviews of the works of Bergson, Bernheim, Binet, Burot, Delboeuf, Espinas [...] Lombroso, Richet, Tarde or Wundt on topics such as comparative psychology, psychology of perception-consciousness-associations-,and dreams, hypnosis, multiple personality disorders or psychophysiology [...] The nosological terminology of research on hysteria informs especially the vocabulary of *The Case of Wagner.* [25]

Nietzsche's insistence on the language of 'hysteria' and 'physiological degeneration' (CW 7), as well as his condemnation of Wagner as a 'master of hypnotic tricks' (CW 5) must be understood within a much broader theoretical interest in hypnotic suggestion. As Leon Chertok reminds us, the 1880 s were '*l'âge d'or de l'hypnose*'[26], an age that was reaching its peak at the time Nietzsche was writing.

It cannot be denied that Nietzsche's debt to nineteenth century psycho-physiology is far from being only theoretically salutary. In fact, the late nineteenth century obsession with hysteria had the disturbing effect of reinforcing his strident misogynistic tone, a tone which is pervasive in Nietzsche's work but is especially intense as his critique of femininity crosses his critique of Wagner. In fact, as Nietzsche defines Wagner as

24 In this respect, the collection of essays that appear in *Nietzsche and Depth Psychology* (Golomb/Santaniello 1999) is still representative of this tendency.

25 Stingelin 2000 424 (trans. mine). For other studies that provide further evidence of Nietzsche's debt to Ribot, see Haaz 2002 and Lampl 1988.

26 Chertok 1993 23.

a 'master of hypnotic tricks' and hastens to add that his success is 'success with nerves and consequently women' (CW 5), he is far from being original. The link between hypnosis, nervous problems and femininity was a connection particularly *à la mode* in the late 1880 s. This is the period of Charcot's highly dramatic demonstrations at the *Salpêtrière*, where he used hypnosis in order to diagnose what was thought to be a typically female nervous problem, namely hysteria. In this sense, as Thorgeirsdottir rightly puts it, Nietzsche is a 'Kind seiner Zeit' and his limits are clearly visible in his misogynistic bias[27].

And yet, Nietzsche's critique of the modern subject's vulnerability to hypnotic suggestion is not limited to 'female Wagnerians' (CW Epilogue). In fact, his critique of hysteria is not an end in itself but is part of a larger project devoted to making sense of Wagner's tyrannical power over the spectators. We are thus back to the same affective problem with which we started, but Nietzsche now relies on a psycho-physiological account of hypnosis in order to make sense of the affective power of what Plato called mimesis. The model of hypnosis underscores the totality of *The Case of Wagner*, but it is in a fragment from the *Will to Power Nachlass* that Nietzsche marks his theoretical debt with most clarity: 'Consider the means of achieving effects to which Wagner most likes to turn [...] to an astonishing extent they resemble the means by which the hypnotist achieves his effect' (WP 839; cf. 10[155] 12.543). For Nietzsche this is, as he says, 'more than a metaphor' (ibid.). In fact, he openly relies on Charcot's hypnotic model in order to account for Wagner's irresistible magnetic power; and if Charcot's account is limited to females, Nietzsche extends it to include male spectators. As he puts it, 'the master of hypnotic trick' as Nietzsche calls Wagner, 'manages to throw down the strongest like bulls' (CW 5)[28]. What we must now add is that this is especially true as these bulls are part of what Nietzsche calls a herd or, as he now prefers to call it, a *Masse*.

For the late Nietzsche mass behaviour and the theatre cannot be dissociated. Hence, he says: 'We know the masses, we know the theatre' (CW 6). Hence again, he defines Wagner as a 'modern artist par excel-

27 On Nietzsche's account of female (Wagnerian) hysteria, see Thorgeirsdottir 1996 224.

28 Nietzsche is here closer to Hippolyte Bernheim of the School of Nancy than to Charcot. In fact, if the latter was a neurologist who insisted on the pathological nature of suggestion, Bernheim was a clinical professor who considered that all subjects are vulnerable to hypnotic suggestion. On this point, see Ellenberger 1994 87.

lence' (CW 5), and his art as 'Massen-Kunst par excellence' (NW Objections). This equivalence between the masses and the theatre amounts to saying that the modern characteristic of Wagner's theatrical language consists in its power to 'persuade the masses' (CW 7). As Lacoue-Labarthe recognized, in Bayreuth was born what he calls, following Nietzsche, 'la première art de masse'[29]. Now, for Nietzsche it is precisely the power of hypnosis or, as he also calls it, following Hippolyte Bernheim's term, the power of 'suggestion' (CW 8) that accounts for Wagner's power to 'persuade the masses' (CW 7). The crucial characteristic of hypnotic suggestion, as Bernheim famously defined it, consists in an 'influence exerted by an idea which has been suggested to, and received by the mind'[30]. Hypnosis, in other words, consists in a common psychic mechanism whereby an external idea is incorporated by the subject and, most strikingly, is felt, experienced, lived, as one's own. Nietzsche is thus perfectly consistent with theories of hypnosis when he severely states in *Gay Science:*

> In the theater one is honest only in the mass; as an individual one lies, to oneself. One leaves oneself at home when one goes to the theater, one renounces the right to one's own tongue and choice, to one's taste (GS 368 3.618)

The problematic of mimetic mass contagion, the subject's passivity, suggestibility, and lack of rational control over one's opinions – in short, all mimetic characteristics that affect the modern masses – are definitively at work within the Wagnerian theatrocracy. And in order to dispel any doubts as to his final diagnosis of the 'needs of the "âme moderne"' (NW Where Wagner belongs) Nietzsche concludes *The Case of Wagner* thus:

> But all of us have, unconsciously, involuntarily, in our bodies, values, words, formulas, moralities of opposed descent, – we are, physiologically considered, false … A diagnosis of the modern soul – (CW Epilogue 6.53)

We were wondering where the power of this tyrant came from? What kind of 'modern' language spoke through him? Nietzsche's answer is clear. It is through the language of hypnotic suggestion that this tyrant dispossessed the subject of the mass of its rational control over its 'values, words, formulas'.

29 Lacoue-Labarthe 1991 19.
30 Bernheim 1957 125.

4. Nietzsche, prophet of Nazism (at least in theory)

In order to finally get to the problem of the political, we must realize that Nietzsche's psycho-physiological insights into the power of hypnotic suggestion are instrumental in pushing his Platonic critique of the Wagnerian theatre (and the critique of modernity it entails) towards new theoretical territory. This territory, we can now add, concerns the emerging field of crowd psychology. In fact, from the outset, Nietzsche's critique of Wagner's so-called 'modern' language is far from being confined to Bayreuth: This hysterico-hypnotico-mass-suggestion is part of what Nietzsche calls 'entirely modern, entirely metropolitan problems' (CW 9) – i.e., problems which concern the modern *polis.* Nietzsche's critique of the language of mimesis, and all it entails (i.e., possession, contagion of emotions and ideas, psychic typography, hypnotic suggestion, in short, what he calls 'the whole psychology of the actor' CW 8) is open to the wider socio-political sphere. As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy recognized,

> in founding Bayreuth his [Wagner's – NL] aim will be deliberately political: it will be that of the unification of the German people, through celebration and theatrical ceremonial (comparable to the unification of the city in tragic ritual). [31]

It is thus not surprising that Nietzsche immediately politicizes his psycho-physiological critique of Wagner: 'It is full of profound significance that the arrival of Wagner coincides in time with the arrival of the "Reich" […] Never has obedience been better, never has commanding' (CW 11). For Nietzsche, Wagner's power is psychological, mimetic, or as he also calls it, hypnotic power. The cultural hero of the German people occupies the place of a 'tyrant', as Nietzsche puts it, in his theatrical autocracy, a tyrant who has the power to 'hypnotize' what Nietzsche often calls 'das Volk'. At times, he even calls the figure of the actor by the German word for leader – a word, which, as we know, will soon become notorious. In fact, as Nietzsche puts it in the 'Preface' to *The Case of Wagner,* he sees in Wagner nothing less than the best *Führer* for the modern soul (CW Preface 6.12) – a *Führer* possessed with the 'mimetic' or 'hypnotic' power to 'move [*bewegen*]' to 'convince [*überreden*]' and finally to 'win over [*gewinnen*]' the masses (CW 6, CW 7, CW Postscript). It is thus in this precise, psychological sense, that Nietzsche's insights into the workings of Wagner's mimetic power anticipate, at least in theory, the

31 Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy 1990 303.

horrors of Nazism and the mimetic dynamic which was responsible for spreading it. At least, this is certainly so if we accept Lacoue-Labarthe's definition of Fascism as 'an actualization of an emotional mass identification'[32].

Nietzsche: not as a forerunner of Nazism, but as a prophet who condemns the very phenomenon his name was so long connected to? No matter how strange this may sound to ears still accustomed to the facile Nietzsche-Nazism connection, this thesis should not come as a surprise. After all, if we consider that Nietzsche's work entails a prolonged meditation on the secret workings of affective mimesis, this conclusion seems nearly inevitable. His distaste for the mimetic herd, his profound knowledge of ancient theatre in general and of Plato's critique of mimesis in particular, his affective insights into Dionysian suggestibility, his critical awareness of late nineteenth century developments in the field of psycho-physiology, and more generally, his acute psychological sensibility, are all elements that point towards such a conclusion.

Nietzsche can see mimetic mass phenomena like Nazism coming because he is theoretically ahead of his time. But he can be ahead only because he is fully aware of the theoretical tradition that precedes him. In a way, we could even say that with respect to the problematic of mimesis, Nietzsche functions as a crucial link between antiquity and modernity; Plato's mimetic psychology and nineteenth century crowd psychology; the language of mimesis and the language of hypnosis.

Now, it is true that as Nietzsche proposes a political alternative that would contain the mimetic phenomena he denounces, his contribution becomes much more difficult to evaluate. In fact, his celebration of the cult of masters and their typographic (will to) power of impression over the malleable raw material of slaves is, once again, (i.e., as it was already the case with the Dionysian) at least psychologically speaking, *not* very far from what he denounces as Wagner's tyrannical pathos. Nietzsche, in fact takes the masters' power of 'impression' over 'unshaped populations' (GM II 17) of slaves quite literally. Thus, he specifies that the slaves (i.e., the mimetic herd) function as 'raw material of common people and half animals' who are 'not only thoroughly kneaded [*durchgeknetet*] and malleable [*gefügig*] but also formed [*geformt*]' (GM II 17 5.324). According to this genealogical account, in the beginning of history there was a shapeless mass of subjects waiting, like raw material in front of the chisel of the artist, to be given a form. The validity of this account is of course highly disputable, and Staten, in his recent account of will to power, is certainly right in pointing out that Nietzsche's account is 'unhistorical' and should not be taken seriously as a faithful description of the origins of socialization[33]. And yet, we should not conclude that 'there never was nor could there ever be any such formless human matter'[34]. In fact, if we consider this account from a *psycho-sociological* perspective, this malleable human mass makes perfect sense insofar as it accounts for the psychological disposition characteristic of a subject who is part of a crowd.

That Nietzsche is thinking along these psychological lines is already suggested by the fact that the German adjective he uses to describe the slaves' malleability (i.e., *gefügig*) denotes *psychic* docility and submission. This detail, which most translators slur over, suggests that Nietzsche, while not insisting on the psycho-physiological language of his Wagner books, has in mind a process of psychological impression, a typography as Lacoue-Labarthe would put it, which, has we have seen, already informs Nietzsche's Platonic account of the power of mimesis. In this sense, the masters' 'shaping forces' (GM II 12) and the process of subjection of an unshaped mass of subjects via an 'impression of form [*Formenaufdrücken*]' (GM II 17), which for Nietzsche take place in *illo tempore*, is not unlike Wagner's modern *psychic* subjection of the theatrical *Masse* via his hypnotic/mimetic power. It is thus significant that in the context of Nietzsche's discussion of the master's power, the concept of mimesis crops up again. Nietzsche, in fact, accounts for the slave's capitulation to the 'divine cult of their masters [...] through compulsion or through submissiveness and mimicry' (GM II 20 5.329), a mimicry which not only in-*forms* the psychic life of a single subject, but of an entire crowd. At least, at those moments when the masters' mimetic will to power imposes the weight of its typographic form on that malleable mass of psychic raw material which is the crowd.

And yet, if this aspect of Nietzsche's politics tends to celebrate the power of the masters, at the origin of culture, his psycho-political *critique*

32 Lacoue-Labarthe 1987 127 (trans. mine). At the conclusion of 'The Nazi Myth' Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy repeat this point: 'Hitlerism could perhaps be defined as the exploitation – lucid but not necessarily cynical, for convinced of its own truth – of the modern masses' openness to [that 'mimetic instrument par excellence' which for them is] myth' (Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy 1990 312). For an extension of this critique of identification in the context of Freud studies, see Borch-Jacobsen 1988 127–239; 1992 1–35.

33 Staten 2006 575.

34 Staten 2006 575.

of mimesis looks back only to better see what lies ahead. And what Nietzsche sees are periods where 'the "actors", all kinds of actors become the real masters' (GS 356)[35]. Now, in order to effectively critique such tyrannical, modern figures, Nietzsche blends Plato's intuitions on mimesis with the modern language of late nineteenth century psycho-physiology, thereby establishing a direct connection between the problematic of the mimetic actor and the problematic of hypnotic suggestion. In a way, we could even say that the Wagnerian theatre seems to function as a microcosm which allows Nietzsche to carefully observe, analyze, and finally refuse the secret workings of the language of mimesis. But for Nietzsche this language is not confined within the walls of the theatre. As he puts it, the Wagnerian mass behaviour is symptomatic of what he calls 'entirely modern, entirely metropolitan problems [*grossstädtische Probleme*]' (CW 9)[36]. In fact, for Nietzsche, 'almost all Europeans [...] confound themselves with their role; they become the victims of their own "good performance" [...] the role has actually become character; and art, nature' (GS 356); Plato would have said 'second nature'. We begin to sense that this theoretical bridge between antiquity and modernity, between mimetic and hypnotic (dis)possession is instrumental in refining Nietzsche's psycho-political critique of Wagner's mimetic histrionics and to extending its implications to the wider social sphere. What is at stake in Nietzsche's daring theoretical conjunction between ancient theatre and modern cities involves not only an attempt to make sense of Wagner's absolute power over the spectators, but also, and more importantly, a theoretical insight into the mimetic power of political leaders on the body politic *tout court.* In short, his critique does not concern theatrical masses only, but also what he calls 'the century of the masses [*Jahrhundert der Masse*]' (NW Where Wagner belongs).

35 Nietzsche's position with respect to these new figures appears to be ambivalent. In fact, he considers these real masters responsible for the emergence of what he calls 'the maddest and most interesting ages of history.' And yet, a few lines later he resolves this ambivalence by siding with the figure of the 'architect' and his capacity to make plans that 'anticipate the future' *against* the actor (GS 356).

36 Nietzsche is careful not to confine his critique of the mimetic *âme moderne* to German cities. Thus he writes that 'people in Paris, too deceive themselves about Wagner, though there they are hardly anything anymore except psychologists' (CW 5). In this sense, he diverges from Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's tendency to consider vulnerability to mimetic/mythic identification as 'a specifically German phenomenon' (Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy 1990 297).

Nietzsche's neo-Platonic psycho-physiological critique of mimesis is thus not only historically prophetic. Insofar as he anticipates *the* fundamental insight of mass psychology, Nietzsche is equally theoretically ahead of his time. Suggestive power over the masses via a hypnotic relationship with the figure of the leader: This is, in a nutshell, the hypothesis that Gustave Le Bon, one of the most popular fathers of crowd psychology will reach a few years later (i.e., in 1895), independently of Nietzsche, in order to account for the violent, contagious and highly irrational behaviour of what he famously called, 'the era of crowds [*l'ère des foules*]'[37]. Le Bon, in fact, resorts to the following analogy: 'an individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd in action soon finds himself [...] in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotizer'[38]. Hypnotic suggestibility to the figure of a leader is thus the paradigmatic model that Le Bon, exactly like Nietzsche before him, refers to in order to make sense of that modern, collective *âme*[39]. In short, insofar as Nietzsche, in his critique of the Wagnerian theatre, establishes a theoretical connection between the hypnotic power of the leader and the masses' psychic contagion, he functions as an important, unacknowledged precursor in this emerging field of analysis.

Now, despite Nietzsche's and Le Bon's emphasis on the language of modernity we could say that their hypothesis indicates that at least in *theory* the problem of mimesis does not seem to have fundamentally changed since the time of Plato. Not unlike Plato, Nietzsche and Le Bon both notice that the subject of the crowd quickly loses its rational control over himself and thus is easily carried away by a charismatic figure or a tyrannical leader. Whether such a leader is called *mimetes*, *meneur* or *Führer*, and the pathos they convey, 'mimetic', 'magnetic' or 'hypnotic' changes nothing with respect to the phenomenon involved. In a way,

37 Le Bon 2002 2. Le Bon has often been rightly attacked for being a conservative who feared the masses. While sharing these political critiques I do not consider that his conservatism invalidates his theory. In fact, as we have seen with Plato and Nietzsche, fears the masses can serve as a powerful motor for a critical dissection of the affects that traverse them. For a prominent leftist contemporary sociologist who recognizes the psycho-sociological value of Le Bon's account see, Moscovici 1985 54–90.

38 Le Bon 2002 7.

39 Moscovici points out that Le Bon considered 'the dramatic stage as a model of social relationships in dramatic form and a place where those relationships were observed' (Moscovici 1985 89).

we could even say that the language of hypnosis is but a modern psycho-physiological reformulation of the ancient language of mimesis; a language that Nietzsche, along with Le Bon and other late nineteenth century thinkers[40], is trying to decipher through the psycho-physiological language of hypnosis.

This account of Nietzsche's prophetic insights into the theory and praxis of psycho-sociology is, of course, not meant to reterritorialize Nietzsche's thought within the confines of crowd psychology. As Renate Reschke points out, '*Masse* is for Nietzsche not a sociological concept; he handles it as a cultural critic'[41]. Nietzsche is and remains the philosopher that he is and thus never focuses exclusively on the emotional dynamics that are responsible for the formation of mass behaviour. And yet, as we have seen, Nietzsche is not only a philosopher. He is also an insightful self-proclaimed psychologist who has access to some of the most recent psychic research of his time. And if we reconstruct the theoretical insights that inform his critique of mass-psychology, the concept of *Masse* acquires not so much a sociological but a *psycho*-sociological value.

In a way, what was already true for the father of philosophy is even truer for Nietzsche. Namely, that psychology is constitutive of his very act of philosophizing. Thus, the crossroads-thinker that Nietzsche is can offer theoretical contributions to the different theoretical paths that transect his writings. And as we have seen, his psycho-sociological theory of the subject leads him to align himself with Plato in order to anticipate some of Le Bon's major claims. Both nineteenth century 'psychologists' (in the broad sense of physicians of the soul), in fact, fundamentally agree with Plato on one fundamental point; namely, that the subject who is part of a crowd is not a rational subject in possession of his thoughts but, rather, a fundamentally passive subject driven by unconscious affects and thus radically vulnerable to emotional manipulation. This, of course, does not mean that Nietzsche sides with Plato in advocating a conception of the subject predicated on rational self-possession. Nothing could be further from it, insofar as Nietzsche's re-inscription of the modern subject in the affectivity of the body makes such flights into the pure realm of rational *logos* impossible (which does not mean that he cannot use the rigor of *logos* to critique mimetic *pathos*). What I have argued is that at work in Nietzsche's thought on mimesis is a complex dou-

40 For another influential French psycho-sociologist who posits mimesis at the heart of sociality see Tarde 1993.

41 Reschke 2000 279 (trans. mine).

ble movement, which implicates his philosophy in what he denounces. On the one hand, he promotes a suggestible-hypnotic-mimetic conception of the subject in the context of his enthusiastic account of Dionysian hysteric creation or the master's typographic will to power over the masses. On the other hand, he develops a psycho-political critique of mimesis which anticipates both the fundamental theoretical intuition of socio-psychology as well as the horror of mimetic contagion which the century of the masses will soon experience.

This said, we might still need to assess the actuality of Nietzsche's critical refusal of mimesis. In a way, this critique is actual in the sense that Nietzsche tries to understand the affective workings of that language endowed with the power to induce massive pathological mimetic outbursts, a language which, as we know, will soon resonate throughout Europe. The theoretical insights that emerge from Nietzsche's art of psychological dissection are, of course, already a lot to be grateful for. But we might go even further in our expectations and ask: What does this mimetic language have to do with our own generation – a generation which did not directly witness the horrors of Nazism?

By way of a conclusion, I would like to suggest that it is maybe with respect to this last question that it appears to be 'philosophically urgent', as Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, to 'think or rethink mimesis'[42]. It is true that we may not necessarily be part of a (theatrical) crowd in Plato, Nietzsche or Le Bon's sense, getting all enthusiastic over contemporary versions of Ion, Wagner or some other mimetic tyrant – though the contemporary success of such old magicians who strive for *der Affekt um jeden Preis* on all kinds of platforms should not be underestimated (especially during election time). On the other hand, who can claim not to be part of a 'public'? The public, already in 1901, was defined by crowd psychologist Gabriel Tarde as a 'virtual crowd' characterized by mental contagion, a contagion, he says echoing Nietzsche, that works through 'action à distance'[43]. This *actio in distans* was once channelled by those very newspapers Nietzsche could not stomach. And nowadays, it is clear that in our

42 Lacoue-Labarthe 1986 282 (trans. mine).

43 Tarde goes as far as defining imitation in terms if '*action à distance* from a spirit to another' (Tarde 1993 vii; trans. mine). It is not unlikely that he borrowed this expression directly from Nietzsche Homeric description of women (see GS 60). That Tarde was familiar with Nietzsche is indicated by the fact that he says that 'we know that chants to Bacchus were the initial germ of Greek tragedy' (Tarde 1989 87; trans. mine). This being, of course, Nietzsche's thesis in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

modern mediatized society, the modern subject is globally channelled into all kinds of *mass*-media Nietzsche would have probably stomached even less. If only because the language that speaks thorough these media tends to shape, mimetically, or as he would say, hypnotically, those very opinions that all too often the modern subject tends to mistake as its own. The technical changes in the medium, in fact, have not fundamentally distorted the grammar of mimetic language; and the language of modernity Nietzsche deftly analyzes is, indeed, still very much with us. Nietzsche's psycho-political critique, in any case, is there to remind the future to keep on guard, so as not to be too impressed by the contaminating power of mimesis

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